

Church History (24): The Life and Ministry of Martin Luther (1)

It's my purpose to first consider the life and ministry of Martin Luther, and then the theology of Martin Luther. With regards to the first of these we will consider his conversion, ninety-five theses, Heidelberg Disputation, three treatises, appearance at Worms, ministerial labors, and domestic life. We will examine the first four this week, and the latter three next week.

I. The Life and Ministry of Martin Luther

1. *His conversion.* Martin Luther (1483-1546), was born "from a family of peasants." "Instead of working as a young boy, the lot of most peasant youth, Luther attended school where he studied Latin, elementary grammar, and the essentials of a religious education" (Nichols).¹ "When Luther turned fourteen, his parents sent him to continue his education at a monastery. The monastery fell under the jurisdiction of the Brethren of the Common Life order. The Luther family's modest income barely funded Martin's first year so, like the other peasant students, he took to begging in the street for his bread. *Panem propter Deum*, 'bread for God's sake,' rolled off Luther's tongue often as he begged along the streets" (Nichols).² From there Luther went to the University of Erfurt, where he received both his B.A. (1502) and M.A. (1505). On July 2, 1505, on his return to Erfurt from visiting family, Luther was caught in a violent thunderstorm. "He was paralyzed by the storm and attached great spiritual significance to it, and in utter fear believed God had unleashed the very thunder of heaven to judge his soul. In total desperation he cried out to St. Anne, the patron saint of miners: 'Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk'" (Nichols).³ Two weeks later he gave away his law books, entered the monastery, and was ordained a priest in 1507. "I tortured myself with praying, fasting, keeping vigils, and freezing—the cold alone was enough to kill me—and I inflicted upon myself such pain as I would never inflict again, even if I could. If any monk ever got to heaven by monkery, then I should have made it. All my monastery companions who knew me can testify to that. If it had lasted much longer, I would have killed myself" (Luther).⁴

During these years, Luther excelled in outer devotion. "He observed the minutest details of discipline. No one surpassed him in prayer, fasting, night watches, self-mortification. He was held up as a model of sanctity" (Schaff).⁵ Yet, for all of this, Luther found only inward turmoil and not peace. Johann Von Staupitz, the abbot of the monastery, sought to assist Luther. "He directed him from his sins to the merits of Christ, from the law to the cross, from works to faith, from scholasticism to the study of the Scriptures" (Schaff).⁶ Staupitz eventually sent him to Wittenberg to further his education (1508) and to Rome on pilgrimage (1510). In 1512, Staupitz sent him back to Wittenberg to lecture in theology in the University. Here Luther studied Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences*. From Lombard he found Augustine, who lead him to Paul and Scripture. "As Luther began to lecture on the Psalms (1513-1515), then on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews (1515-1518), he began thinking differently about sin and salvation" (Nichols).⁷

The exact date of Luther's conversion has been debated. "Suggestions range from 1513 to 1520" (Nichols).⁸ His commentary on Romans published in 1515 explained the phrase "the just shall live by faith"

¹ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 24-25

² Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 26

³ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 24-25

⁴ Martin Luther, *Works*, 24:23-24

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:116

⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:116

⁷ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 32-33

⁸ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 35-37

(1:17), as "growing more and more and a seeking and striving to be more righteous, even to the hour of death," while the 1518 addition says, "only in the gospel is the righteousness of God revealed; that is, who is and becomes righteous before God and how this takes place by faith alone."⁹ Thus, it's evident that his change took place between 1515 and 1518. Of this event Luther said: "There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: The righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith. Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."¹⁰

2. *His Ninety-Five Theses*. On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Wittenberg church. These were, in large part complaints against the abuse of indulgences. He entitled it, *Disputation to Explain the Virtue of Indulgences*. An indulgence was the full or partial remission of temporal punishments due for forgiven sins. The indulgence was granted by the Church after the sinner has confessed and received absolution. While only God forgave the eternal punishment of sin the Church forgave temporal punishment, both in this life and purgatory. The indulgence drew upon the Treasure House of Merit accumulated by Christ and the virtues of the saints. The Church sold indulgences both for the sinner and dead family members. In order to raise funds to restore St. Peter's Church in Rome, the selling of indulgences increased. Johann Tetzel (d.1519) was appointed to sell them in the name of the Pope. "To understand indulgences, we need to become acquainted with the system of penance for the Roman Church. Penance involved four steps: contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution. Tetzel's indulgence, which came with Leo X's seal of approval, short-circuited the process by reducing the first three steps down to one quite simple one: the purchase of an indulgence slip. With the indulgence, Tetzel assured his purchasers, comes full absolution of 'complete forgiveness of sins'" (Nichols).¹¹ "The common people eagerly embraced this rare offer of salvation from punishment, and made no clear distinction between the guilt and punishment of sin; after the sermon they approached with burning candles the chests, confessed their sins, paid the money, and received the letter of indulgence which they cherished as a passport to heaven" (Schaff).¹²

"After serious deliberation, without consulting any of his colleagues or friends, but following an irresistible impulse, Luther resolved upon a public act of unforeseen consequences" (Schaff).¹³ As it was common for theological papers to be posted on the door, to arouse and invite discussion, Luther had hoped to spark a conversation about indulgences. "No one accepted the challenge, and no discussion took place. The professors and students of Wittenberg were of one mind on the subject. But the Theses were copied, translated, and spread as on angels' wings throughout Germany and Europe in a few weeks" (Schaff).¹⁴ Luther prefaced his theses by saying, "Out of love and zeal for truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following theses will be publicly discussed at Wittenberg under the chairmanship of the reverend father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and appointed Lecturer on these subjects at that place."

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matt.4:17), He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Works*, 25:151

¹⁰ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 37-38

¹¹ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 34-35

¹² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:154

¹³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:155

¹⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:156

32. Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.
36. Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters.
37. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.
62. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.
65. Therefore the treasures of the gospel are nets with which one formerly fished for men of wealth.
66. The treasures of indulgences are nets with which one now fishes for the wealth of men.¹⁵

Some two years ago I wrote on indulgences but in such a way that I now deeply regret having published that little book (his *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses* in 1518). At that time I still clung with a mighty superstition to the tyranny of Rome, and so I held that indulgences should not be altogether rejected, seeing that they were approved by the common consent of so many. Would that I could prevail upon the booksellers and persuade all who have read them to burn the whole of my booklets on indulgences, and instead of all that I have written on this subject, adopt this proposition: **INDULGENCES ARE WICKED DEVICES OF THE FLATTERERS OF ROME.**¹⁶

3. *His Heidelberg Disputation.* Following his posting of the ninety-five theses, in April of 1518, "Luther traveled to the city of Heidelberg for a regular chapter meeting of the Augustinian Order. It was here that he presided over what is now the famous Heidelberg Disputation" (Trueman).¹⁷ Luther discussed and defended a set of forty theses. "Within these, Luther defended Augustine's doctrine of sin and grace, and attacked the way that the Schoolmen had subjected Christian theology to Aristotle's philosophy" (Needham).¹⁸ "The event can be regarded as one of the theologically foundational events for later Lutheranism. The debate consisted of forty theses, the first twenty-eight being theological, and the last twelve being philosophical" (Trueman).¹⁹ Several young men who were present for this disputation (among them being Martin Bucer), went on to further the Reform in Germany. "After Luther's departure, these noble-minded men began to teach at Heidelberg. They felt it their duty to continue what the man of God had begun and not allow the flame to expire which he had lighted up" (D'Aubigne).²⁰

3. Man's works, however fair and good they may be, are, however, to all appearance, nothing but deadly sins.
4. God's works, however unsightly and bad they may appear, have, however, an everlasting merit.
13. Since the fall of man, freewill is but an idle word; and if man does all he can, he still sins mortally.
18. It is certain that man must altogether despair of himself in order to be made capable of receiving Christ's grace.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Ninety-Five Theses*, 7-15

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 123-124

¹⁷ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 57

¹⁸ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:79-80

¹⁹ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 57

²⁰ Merle D'Aubigne, *The Triumph of Truth: A Life of Martin Luther*, 120

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the things what it actually is.

23. The law calls forth God's anger, kills, curses, accuses, judges, and condemns whatsoever is not in Christ.

25. That man is not justified who performs many works, but he who without works has much faith in Christ.

26. The law says, 'Do this'; and what it commands is never done. Grace says, 'Believe in Him'; and immediately all things are done.

28. The love of God finds nothing in man, but creates in him what He loves. The love of man proceeds from His well-beloved.²¹

"At the heart of the theology elaborated that day is one of the most famous distinctions Luther makes, and one that is of fundamental importance to his theology in general: that between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross" (Trueman).²² In short, a theologian of glory seeks to view God outside the cross, whereas a theologian of the cross, humbles himself, as he beholds God only through Christ. Simply put, no man can behold the glory of God outside of Christ, but only in and through the cross. "God in His majesty, apart from the flesh of Christ, is a terrifying, unknowable, powerful God before whom no fallen human can stand. Yet, in the weakness of human flesh, and especially the agonizing death on the cross, God has come to His people as a God of grace and tender mercy" (Trueman).²³

This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls 'enemies of the cross of Christ,' for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are dethroned and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified.²⁴

4. *His three treatises.* "The year 1520 marks the watershed of the Reformation. On June 15 Pope Leo X gave Luther sixty days to recant or be declared a heretic. Luther responded by writing three treatises. These three treatises of 1520 are the heart of Luther's protest against the church of his day. The first was written in August, the second in October, and the third in November."²⁵ These closed the door to any possible reconciliation with Rome. He began the first treatise with the words, "The time for silence is past, and the time to speak has come."²⁶ Prior to this, Luther wrote as one attempting to turn the church from her errors. He now wrote as one separating from it. "These works widened the

²¹ Merle D'Aubigne, *The Triumph of Truth: A Life of Martin Luther*, 117

²² Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 57-58

²³ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 65

²⁴ Martin Luther, as quoted by Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3:40-41

²⁵ From Forward of *Three Treatises*, 2

²⁶ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 7

breach between Luther and the church. By the end of 1520, Luther's break with the church was all but final" (Nichols).²⁷ "Luther embarked upon laying out his manifesto for what a Reformation church should look like in the three great treatises of 1520: *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*; *The Freedom of the Christian Man*; and *An Appeal to the German Nobility*. These three works, taken together, represent perhaps Luther's most sustained and positive vision for what reformation should be" (Trueman).²⁸

(1) *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (August, 1520). "Luther wrote this work calling on the German nobility to reform the church because the papacy and church councils had failed to do so. He argued that the pope and the priesthood had built walls to protect themselves from reform, claiming that they alone could interpret Scripture. Luther maintained the priesthood of the believer, the idea that all Christians are priests of God with direct access to the throne of grace and able to interpret Scripture themselves" (Lawson).²⁹ "Popes and ecumenical councils, Luther declared, had failed to reform the Church. Therefore it was the duty of the secular rulers to step in. Luther argued that the secular rulers were Christians, and if the clergy would not reform the German Church, then the German Emperor, princes, and nobles must take extraordinary emergency measures to bring about reformation and save Germany from God's wrath" (Needham).³⁰

Luther described the Romanists as fortified by three walls or claims. "The Romanists have very cleverly built three walls around themselves. Hitherto they have protected themselves by these walls in such a way that no one has been able to reform them. As a result, the whole of Christendom has fallen abominably."³¹ These three walls were: (a) the claim that the clergy were superior to the laity, and that the laity could not exercise any power in the Church; (b) the claim that the papacy was infallibly inspired by the Holy Spirit, and therefore that the popes alone could interpret Scripture; (c) the claim that the papacy alone could summon an ecumenical council of the Church.³² "For these reasons, the Christian nobility should set itself against the pope as against a common enemy and destroyer of Christendom for the salvation of the poor souls who perish because of this tyranny."³³

After describing these three walls, Luther then provided twenty-seven practical ways to begin destroying or tearing them down. "1. Every prince, every noble, every city should henceforth forbid their subjects to pay annates (yearly dues) to Rome and should abolish them entirely. 3. An imperial law should be issued that no bishop's confirmation shall henceforth be secured from Rome, but that the ordinance of the most holy and famous Council of Nicea be restored. This ordinance decreed that a bishop shall be confirmed by the two nearest bishops or by the archbishop. 4. It should be decreed that no temporal matter is to be referred to Rome, but that all such cases shall be left to the temporal authority, as the Romanists themselves prescribe in that canon law of theirs, which they do not observe."³⁴

(2) *Babylonian Captivity* (October, 1520). "Luther penned this piece attacking the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. He maintained, just as the Babylonians carried the Jews away from Jerusalem into captivity, so the papacy had carried Christians in Europe away from the Scriptures" (Lawson).³⁵ "This was a more scholarly work written in Latin. Luther compared the Western Catholic

²⁷ Stephen Nichols, *Martin Luther*, 40, 86

²⁸ Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 43

²⁹ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 345

³⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:94-95

³¹ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 10

³² Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 12-26

³³ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 45-46

³⁴ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 44-112

³⁵ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 345

Church to Israel exiled in Babylon. Rome's doctrine of the sacraments, he asserted, had robbed Christians of their freedom. Most of the treatise concerned holy communion" (Needham).³⁶ To be specific, Luther suggested three errors about communion which had brought Christians into bondage: "1. The refusal to give the cup to the laity. 2. The doctrine of transubstantiation. 3. The sacrifice of the mass. This Luther declared, was the most blasphemous bondage of all. He attacked the idea that the priest offered up Christ to God in holy communion, and thereby performed a good work which merited God's grace" (Needham).³⁷

(3) *The Freedom of the Christian* (November, 1520). "Luther wrote this work to attack Rome's view of salvation, maintaining that justification is by faith alone. It is not by good works that we become righteous, he said, but only personal faith in Christ. Further, he maintained that a Christian is not under the tyranny of the pope, but under the lordship of Christ" (Lawson).³⁸ "Luther proclaimed that faith alone brought the Christian into saving union with Jesus Christ, through which all the blessings and benefits of Christ's atoning work became the believer's possession" (Needham).³⁹ He began with two propositions "concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."⁴⁰ He then said, "These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul's own statements, who says in 1Cor.9:19, 'For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all,' and in Rom.13:8, 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another.' Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved."⁴¹

(a) The inner man becomes righteous before God by faith alone. "One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ. If the soul has the Word of God, it is rich and lacks nothing, since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every countless blessing. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God, according to Rom.10:9; 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' Furthermore, 'Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified' (Rom.10:4). Therefore, it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith."⁴²

(b) The outer man must restrain himself and serve his fellow man. "Although, as I have said, a man is abundantly and sufficiently justified by faith inwardly, in his spirit, and so has all that he needs, yet he remains in this mortal life on earth. In this life he must control his own body and have dealings with men. Here the works begin; here a man cannot enjoy leisure; here he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fasting, watchings, labors, and other reasonable disciplines."⁴³ "Lastly, we shall also speak of the things which he does toward his neighbor. A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not for himself."⁴⁴

³⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:97

³⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:97-98

³⁸ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 345-346

³⁹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:99

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 277

⁴¹ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 277-278

⁴² Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 278-280

⁴³ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 294-295

⁴⁴ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 301